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Model student recounts horrors of FTAA arrest

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Laurel Ripple, 21, is everything we say we want our young people to be -- smart, driven, socially conscious.

When she was a senior at MAST Academy, Laurel delivered 3,000 postcards to Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, signed by high school students opposed to his plan to build an airport on the edge of the Everglades.

A member of the Sierra Club since she was a teenager, Ripple spent the last six months encouraging college students like herself to come to Miami and oppose the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

On Nov. 21, Laurel was part of a vigil outside the county jail for the protesters arrested the day before. After three hours, the Miami-Dade police ordered everyone to leave. As anyone who watched the scene unfold live on television can attest, the police moved forward into the crowd of 100 people, cutting off about 40 protesters and trapping them against a chain link fence.

"The front line of the police all had shields, and they kept pushing in, pinning us against the fence," recalls Laurel, who grew up in South Miami. After a few minutes, Laurel said she fell to the ground and covered her head, whereupon an officer grabbed her wrists with one hand, lifted her arms and began blasting her with pepper spray.

"I started screaming in pain," Laurel says. "He had held the canister so close to my face that my hair and face were dripping with pepper spray."

In the melee, she said she badly twisted her ankle. She was taken to a makeshift jail in Earlington Heights for processing and decontamination.

"Because I couldn't walk, they dragged me," she recalls. "They had a shower set up in the parking lot. Two officers held me up as I was drenched for a few seconds with water. I was then dragged into this tent. It was dark. There were four men in white biohazard suits. I'm still coughing and crying from the pepper spray. I can't really tell what is happening."

With her hands still bound behind her back, she said she felt her T-shirt coming apart. "That's when I realized they had scissors and they were cutting my clothes off of me," she says.

She said she begged them to stop, saying she could take her own clothes off. And she asked why there wasn't a female officer present. "They didn't say anything to me," she says, her hands shaking as she lights a cigarette. "No one ever said a word to me while they were doing this."

``After they cut my shirt off, they cut off my jeans and my underwear. I'm standing there totally naked. I felt completely violated. It was humiliating."

Wearing a set of surgical scrubs, she was booked into jail barefoot, and claims she never received medical attention for her ankle.

Her criminal charge: unlawful assembly, a misdemeanor.

Sgt. Pete Andreu, a spokesman for the Miami-Dade Police Department, said he could neither confirm nor deny Laurel was pepper-sprayed by police. The "chemical agent" could have been released by one of the protesters, he said. He also doubted she ever asked for medical help. The decontamination, he added, was done by the Miami-Dade Fire Department.

The fire department said Laurel received standard treatment for "gross decontamination." "If we had permitted her to remove her own clothes, she could have recontaminated herself," said fire department spokesman Lt. Eugene Germain Jr.

I wonder how Penelas or Miami Mayor Manny Diaz would feel if their wives or their children were put through such a process.

Jonathan Ullman, South Florida field representative for the Sierra Club, saw Laurel being arrested on television.

"She's a great kid," he says. ``I couldn't believe it."

Ullman called the Washington office of the Sierra Club, which dispatched attorneys to get Laurel out of jail within a few hours. The Sierra Club's executive director wrote President Bush this month demanding a Justice Department investigation into Laurel's arrest and the allegations of police misconduct made by other Sierra Club members.

So far, there has been no response. Laurel's next court date is Dec. 30.